United Nations A/C.4/63/SR.20

General Assembly
Sixty-third session

Official Records

Distr.: General
18 December 2008

Original: English

Special Political and Decolonization Committee
Fourth Committee

Summary record of the 20th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 30 October 2008, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Argüello ..... (Argentina)
later: Mr. Elsherbini (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Egypt)

Contents

Agenda item 29: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (*continued*)

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned *within one week of the date of publication* to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DC2-750, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate corrigendum for each Committee.

08-57717 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 29: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (*continued*) (A/63/13, A/63/269, A/63/315, A/63/317 and A/63/375

1. **Ms. Raz-Schechter** (Israel) said that Israel would continue to facilitate the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) while meeting its own legitimate security concerns. However, it believed that the Commissioner-General's report continued a tradition of one-sidedness and lack of balance. Its tone and selective use of facts suggested that the responsibility for the precarious situation of the Palestinians rested exclusively with Israel.

2. In fact, Israel remained committed to finding a solution to the Palestine refugee problem in the framework of a comprehensive peace settlement. Significant efforts were being made under the Annapolis process, to reach a just and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel had removed 111 roadblocks and 4 checkpoints in the West Bank, created a pilot project to reinforce the Palestinian police and promote economic development, was working to promote Palestinian industrial parks and had constructed several power plants as a joint project between Israel and the Palestinians. Those efforts had been accompanied by significant increases in tourism and in the movement of goods in the West Bank, and also in the number of permits allowing Palestinians to work in Israel.

3. Despite the progress in the West Bank, however, the violent rise of Hamas in the Gaza Strip had resulted in a serious deterioration of the situation on the ground on both sides of the border. Gaza had regressed and become a major threat to Israeli cities and towns, which were under constant attack from Hamas rocket and mortar fire. The report should have drawn a connection between Israel's ability to ease security restrictions and the level of such terrorist attacks. Israel had facilitated the entrance of large quantities of food, fuel and other materials into the Gaza Strip during the period of relative calm that had begun in June 2008, but Hamas continued to rearm itself and openly threaten Israeli civilians and soldiers. Again, the report should have established a relationship between Israel's ability to provide assistance and the overall security situation; instead, it gave the impression that Israel's actions took place in a vacuum.

4. Israel maintained its position with respect to its support of the Agency's mandate, but insisted that UNRWA and any resolution referring to its activities should avoid involvement with political issues and should also consider Israel's security concerns in the light of the constant threats. She also called on UNRWA to improve its screening methods to ensure that its staff were not involved in terrorist activities or unauthorized political activity.

5. While some Arab countries were genuinely interested in the welfare of Palestine refugees, many continued to take a cynical approach. Most had failed to help mediate a solution to the human tragedy resulting from the destruction of the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Lebanon. The great majority of funds to rebuild the camp had come from Western countries. Similarly, only five Arab countries had contributed funding to UNRWA from 2000 to 2007; those contributions represented only about 10 per cent of the Agency's overall budget for the period.

6. Israel was a democratic State that was struggling to maintain a balance between the rights and freedoms of its own citizens and those of persons who had chosen to use a civilian population as shields. While not desiring to harm or restrict Palestinians in any way, Israel could not afford to refrain from taking action when the lives of its own citizens were continuously threatened. Despite the repeated attacks against Israelis as they provided humanitarian aid to Gaza, Israel would continue to offer its assistance to UNRWA and the Palestinians. Israel sincerely hoped that there would be substantial changes in the will of the Palestinian leadership to find common ground towards peace, and it looked forward to the achievement of a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians and the establishment of a viable Palestinian State living in peace and security side by side with Israel.

7. **Mr. Kassianides** (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the candidate countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania and Montenegro; and, in addition, Armenia, Liechtenstein, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, said that the European Union fully supported UNRWA and its staff, and also appreciated the consistent efforts of the Jordanian, Syrian and Lebanese authorities to

provide assistance to Palestine refugees over the past half century. In the context of the need for adapting the Agency's operational processes, the European Union supported the organizational development process initiated in 2006.

8. The European Union remained very concerned about the economic and humanitarian situation of the refugees, especially of children, for whom special protection and full observance of their rights were essential. The situation in the Gaza Strip was critical, and required constant humanitarian assistance and continuity of basic services. Moreover, with regard to the provision of basic services in the context of movement restrictions, strict adherence to international humanitarian law was vital. The European Union supported the reopening of the crossings to and from the Gaza Strip, not only to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian services, but also to boost economic development through the resumption of trade. While firmly condemning the unacceptable attacks on Israeli territory and acknowledging Israel's right to self-defence, the European Union urged all parties, including Israel, not to deny the citizens of Gaza their basic needs, and to guarantee free and secure access to humanitarian goods and personnel.

9. The chronic fiscal deficit affecting the UNRWA general budget was cause for concern, as it threatened to reduce the levels of security and aid provided by the Agency. The European Union supported efforts to increase the number of donors, particularly in the region, as well as the initiatives described in the resource mobilization strategy. It also reaffirmed its own commitment to maintain its humanitarian and economic assistance to the Palestinian people through the PEGASE financing mechanism .

10. Finally, the European Union saluted the work undertaken by UNRWA to rebuild the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Lebanon, and invited all donor countries and countries in the region to honour their commitments to rebuild the camp.

11. **Mr. Jølle** (Norway) commended the Agency and its staff for their untiring efforts to assist Palestine refugees, and urged all donors, including regional countries, to contribute to the Agency's emergency and general activities. Norway was by providing US$ 2 million for reconstruction and humanitarian assistance to the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp.

12. The social and economic situation in the Gaza Strip was worrying, with the cost of food aid rising because of Israeli import restrictions. While conditions there had improved slightly during the past summer, the amount of commercial and humanitarian goods allowed into the Gaza Strip was still insufficient to meet humanitarian needs or the basic requirements for a viable private sector. Norway called on Israel to ease its restrictions on the movement of goods and people, and to refrain from administering punitive measures on the entire population of the Gaza Strip.

13. **Ms. Halpern** (United States of America) said that her Government shared the international community's concerns about the difficult situation facing the Palestinian people. It had provided almost $600 million in humanitarian and development assistance to Palestinians in fiscal year 2008, over one fourth of which had gone to core services and emergency relief provided by UNRWA.

14. The Agency suffered from regular financial shortfalls that inhibited its ability to provide basic health and education services needed by its beneficiaries. Particularly urgent was the funding gap UNRWA faced in its effort to assist the 30,000 Palestine refugees displaced from Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Northern Lebanon. Should the shortfall continue, it could force the Agency to reduce emergency assistance and delay reconstruction of the camp; that, in turn, could increase instability in Lebanon and adversely affect regional security. Her delegation therefore called upon Member States, particularly countries in the region, to increase their contribution to the core budget and emergency appeals of UNRWA. It also looked to the Agency to continue its efforts to strengthen fiscal oversight and management capacity through its organizational development plan.

15. **Mr. Al-Yaqubi** (Oman) said that the question of the Palestine refugees was the oldest and most important issue on the agenda of the United Nations. For over 60 years, those refugees had suffered in camps scattered throughout the Near East. The recent restrictions placed by Israel on the movement of UNRWA staff had further exacerbated their situation. While the number of refugees officially registered with the Agency was nearly 4.5 million, that figure did not accurately reflect the total population because not all of the refugees were registered. Nonetheless, all of the Palestine refugees, including the unregistered, had the

right to return and live freely and peacefully in their land.

16. His delegation called on the community of nations to pressure Israel to cease its hostile actions against Palestinian civilians and to not impede the work of UNRWA. Member States should use all available means to help the Agency fulfil its mandate until all of the Palestine refugees had returned to their land.

17. **Mr. Al-Mekrad** (Kuwait) said that the question of the Palestine refugees was an international responsibility. Accordingly, UNRWA must continue its operations until the question of those refugees had been resolved in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

18. While realizing that financial difficulties were hindering the Agency in its work, his delegation would like to see UNRWA increase its services. Moreover, it should carry out its mandate in the five operational areas (the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan) without discrimination.

19. Kuwait had provided, and continued to provide, financial and material assistance to the Palestine refugees and it had contributed to the financing of numerous infrastructure projects. It would continue to support UNRWA by honouring its commitment to contribute $1.5 million to the Agency's budget. He stressed that the Agency's local staff members should enjoy the same privileges as other United Nations employees working in the region.

20. Finally, expressing his delegation's full support for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, he demanded that the Israeli Government respect the principle of land for peace, which was the foundation of the peace process, and comply with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

21. **Mr. Badji** (Senegal) said that the programmes and services UNRWA provided to the Palestine refugees served to lighten the suffering caused by the illegal activities undertaken by Israel in defiance of the relevant international instruments. Israel's actions were unacceptable and interfered with UNRWA's work. His delegation therefore urged that UNRWA be allowed to continue providing its services without interference until a just and lasting solution to the question of the Palestine refugees had been found.

22. Noting that the Agency's work was also threatened because of inadequate funding, he urgently appealed to all donors to ensure that the Agency's programmes were provided with dependable financial support. His delegation welcomed the administrative reforms being carried out by the Agency despite the difficult operational and economic conditions it faced. As the sixtieth anniversary of the Agency approached, it was incumbent on the entire international community to reflect on what more could be done to hasten the arrival of a viable, independent and sovereign State for the Palestinian people.

23. **Mr. Elsherbini** (Egypt) said that Israel bore full responsibility for the plight of the Palestine refugees. It continued to deprive the Palestinian people of their rights and to deny its legal and moral responsibilities for their suffering. As noted in numerous reports, including the most recent report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza had deteriorated as a result of the practices of the Israeli occupation authorities. The restrictions imposed by those authorities on the movement of UNRWA staff not only placed additional burdens on the Agency but violated the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and the 1967 Comay-Michelmore Agreement.

24. The Israeli closure policy further exacerbated the situation by depriving the West Bank refugees of the ability to work, attend educational institutions and maintain family ties. Meanwhile, Gazans were being deprived of food, fuel and humanitarian relief supplies. All of that had increased Palestinian frustrations and affected ongoing efforts aimed at achieving peace and security and the creation of a viable, independent Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza. There was now little hope of reaching agreement on final-status issues by the end of 2008, as had been agreed at Annapolis.

25. His delegation denounced the continued construction of the illegal separation wall and called on Israel to dismantle the portions already built, in compliance with the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the matter. The continued building of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza was a grave violation of international law, United Nations resolutions and Israel's commitments under the Road Map.

26. His delegation therefore called upon the donor community to continue its financial support for the Agency and to respond to the latter's emergency appeals for funding. It also supported the Agency's request to increase the number of international staff in order to ensure the successful implementation of structural and administrative reforms designed to increase its efficiency.

27. **Mr. Shukla** (India) said that the severe challenges UNRWA continued to face, as described in the report of the Commissioner-General, directly affected the well-being of Palestinian refugees and the Agency's ability to discharge its humanitarian responsibilities. Such failure might undermine the security and stability of an already volatile region.

28. The Agency's budgetary shortfall continued to grow, as did the demand for its services, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, the destruction of the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Lebanon had compounded the Agency's problems. Greater international efforts were urgently needed to ease UNRWA's fiscal burden.

29. Restrictions on movement and the blockade of Gaza were having serious consequences in an already precarious humanitarian situation, and restrictions on fuel and electricity supply in Gaza were further compounding the difficulties. Moreover, the ongoing intra-Palestinian conflict had intensified the problem of access, forcing several refugee communities to seek assistance after decades of self-reliance.

30. The insecurity bred by extreme poverty among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories was heightened by the lack of definitive progress in the peace process, contrary to the expectations of the international community since the Annapolis summit. The frustration resulting on the ground from further delays in the peace process was increasing the volatility of the situation, particularly in the context of continued construction of the separation wall and expansion of Israeli settlements, in contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Road Map.

31. In order to bring about a lasting solution to the Palestine refugee question, the parties to the conflict and the international community must redouble their efforts to resolve the long-standing conflict. His Government endorsed all efforts to support UNRWA by expanding its capacity to render assistance.

32. *Mr. Elsherbini (Egypt), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.*

33. **Mr. Tsuruga** (Japan) said that his country regarded the Palestine refugee problem as the core issue of the peace process and had provided over $500 million in aid for Palestine refugees over the previous half century as part of its policy of "human security", which focused on ensuring that people were empowered to live in dignity.

34. Expressing deep concern at the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly the Gaza Strip, he urged the international community to continue supporting the Palestinian people. His Government had, through UNRWA, provided several million dollars for emergency medical supplies, food aid and temporary accommodation for refugees displaced by fighting in northern Lebanon, as well as to those in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Jordan and Syria. He expressed appreciation for the organizational development being carried out under the leadership of the Commissioner-General, which would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Agency. His country remained committed to supporting UNRWA, and hoped that the international community would do the same.

35. **Ms. Khan** (Bangladesh) noted that the international community's repeated appeals to Israel to improve the deteriorating conditions of the Palestinians had gone unheeded. Her delegation remained deeply concerned about the dire humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon, where intensive Israeli military operations and settlement activities had caused widespread displacement of the innocent civilian population. Bangladesh strongly condemned illegal Israeli encroachment on Palestinian lands.

36. Greater restrictions on the freedom of movement of UNRWA personnel and vehicles in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were severely hampering the Agency's humanitarian activities. In addition, Israeli sanctions had led to a further decline in the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinian people, as evinced, inter alia, by the dramatic rise in unemployment in recent years. Her delegation urged Israel to remove all restrictions and taxes imposed on the Palestinians' economic activities, and called for unrestricted mobility for and non-interference in UNRWA operations.

37. She welcomed the success of the Agency's microcredit programme, and called for it to be extended to include poverty-stricken Palestinian women. Given its role as a pioneer of microcredit, Bangladesh would be happy to help fine-tune the programme in order to meet the specific needs of the Palestinian people and the region as a whole.

38. Finally, she appealed to the international community to contribute generously to UNRWA so that it was not forced to cut back on its services to Palestine refugees and, in particular, so that it could provide rehabilitation and emergency assistance to the refugees in the Nahr al Barid camp in northern Lebanon.

39. **Mr. Al-Zayani** (Bahrain) said that the report had shed light on the deteriorating conditions inside the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Poverty and unemployment had risen and there had been rampant human rights violations. The separation wall and its associated regime had continued to expand, notwithstanding the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Although the wall had yet to be completed, it had already had a devastating impact on Palestinian agriculture and had contributed to population displacement throughout the West Bank.

40. The report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (A/63/375) indicated that, as in previous years, the Agency had a large funding gap in its budget and that cash flow problems had adversely impacted its financial position. In that connection, his delegation commended the Agency for the innovative methods it had used to minimize the effect of the budget gap on its core programmes and expressed the hope that donors would come up with additional contributions so that UNRWA could overcome its financial crisis and expand its programmes in proportion to the growth in the refugee population.

41. **Mr. Natalegawa** (Indonesia) said that the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories continued to be marked by high levels of unemployment, poverty and economic decline, as well as extensive violations of Palestinian rights. The report of the Commissioner-General confirmed the extent of the impact of the wall on the Palestinian economy. Moreover, the incursions led by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and the closure of border crossings continued to cause the Palestinian people great suffering. It was deplorable that approximately 40 per cent of the West Bank was now taken up by settlements, outposts, military bases and other areas.

42. Expressing grave concern at the situation endured by Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, he stressed that the truce must result in further relief for the civilian population including the regular opening of the crossings for both humanitarian and commercial flows. He also hoped that stalled United Nations and other donor projects would immediately resume. Finally, he commended the Agency for its steadfast dedication to alleviating Palestinian suffering under the current circumstances.

43. **Ms. Koning AbuZayd** (Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) said that the financial difficulties with which the Agency was struggling were both immediate and medium-term. While Member States were right to focus on the current situation in the Nahr al-Barid camp, the problems caused by the global financial crisis must not be overlooked, given their potentially serious consequences.

44. Concern had also been expressed at the problems of movement of people and goods in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; in that connection, she called for a rededication to the implementation of the 2005 Access and Movement Agreement, to which all parties, especially Israel and the Palestinian Authorities, had agreed.

45. The ministerial level event to be held in commemoration of the Agency's 60th anniversary the following year would provide an opportunity for sober reflection on what had been achieved by the refugees and UNRWA, as well as what remained to be done.

46. Lastly, she expressed appreciation for the overwhelming support extended to UNRWA and its staff by the donor countries, the host authorities and the Committee.

47. **Mr. Hosseini** (Islamic Republic of Iran), speaking in exercise of the right to reply, said that unsubstantiated allegations had been made about his country by the representative of a regime based on violence, occupation, State terrorism and bloodshed. The Zionist regime had lacked legitimacy since its inception, and its leaders had been guilty of crimes against humanity as well as war crimes. It is not surprising, therefore, that its representative should utter

such propaganda. His delegation rejected the fabrications and distortions, which were aimed at diverting attention from the atrocities committed in Palestine and elsewhere in the region. The regime itself posed the most serious threat to the world and should be urgently countered by the international community.

48. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the statement of the representative of Israel had been an attempt to mask the ugly face of the Israeli occupation of Arab lands. The so-called "democratic State" of which she had spoken was holding nearly 11,000 Palestinians, including the legitimately elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, in its prisons. It was also the same place where the Arab residents of Acre had been attacked by mobs for nearly three weeks simply because one of them had operated an automobile on Yom Kippur.

49. The representative of Israel had alleged that the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza had started when Hamas took control of that territory. All the facts clearly indicated that the suffering of the Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank was caused by the Israeli occupation. Practically speaking, Israel continued to occupy Gaza, given that it controlled the territory's six crossing points; it was, therefore, legally liable for the humanitarian and economic conditions therein. She had also claimed that Hamas had committed aggressions against Israel; in fact, Hamas had been founded in response to Israeli occupation.

50. The legitimacy of Israel's existence was based on General Assembly resolution 181 (II). However, implementation of that resolution also called for implementation of resolution 194 (III) regarding the return of the Palestine refugees. Thus until that resolution was implemented, the Agency would not have fulfilled its historic responsibility towards the Palestinian people.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.